

DE GAS

DEGAS



SELF PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST
The Louvre Museum, Paris

1855 Oil 32" x 26 $\frac{1}{2}$ "

EDGAR
DEGAS

by

CAMILLE MAUCLAIR

Adapted by

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THE DANCING LESSON

1880-85 Oil 14 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 34 $\frac{3}{4}$ "

Collection Mrs. Esther Fiske Hammond, Santa Barbara

DEGAS

by

CAMILLE MAUCLAIR

THAT AN artist should be renowned and at the same time inadequately known, is not unusual, for creative originality seldom reveals its secret. During the twenty-eight years which have elapsed since the death of Degas, we have continuously amended our estimates of his character and the meaning of his work, as well as its place in the French School of painting. Fundamentally his life was a secret one. He remained a bachelor and a misanthrope — if reserving all his faculties for work, and surrendering comforts and vanities for his art, can be interpreted as misanthropy.

Associated with the Impressionists, he was not truly of their number. He met, at the Café Guerbois in Paris, with a group of painters and novelists who assembled to acclaim the principles of a new aestheticism. They were in common revolt against academic teachings and delusive literary conceptions, and in agreement as to the necessity of being true to life, each in his fashion. Zola and Manet were the leading figures in a group that included Monet, Renoir, Legros, Pissarro, Fantin-Latour, and many others. The correct, reserved and sarcastic Degas listened in silence to their manifestoes, and fought shy of theories. He was hardly a naturalist, in the sense that the word was used, and still less an

Impressionist, when the term was introduced later. People called him a realist, and that he endeavored always to portray truth. At the time he practiced an un-literary, almost unsearched everywhere for movement and matter interested him less and less, a beauty, he substituted that of character.

"No art is less spontaneous than painting," he declared, and to a painful life in its natural, and I in its artificial.

Nevertheless, though often opposed, he exhibited with his friends and had his share of their castigation and ostracism.

* * *

Edgar Hilaire Germain de Gas was born at Rue St. George, on June 29, 1834. He was called Edgar, and disdaining the use of the name, he called himself just "Degas." His father, of an ancient Breton stock; his mother belonged to a family, which, several generations before, had emigrated from New Orleans and amassed a fortune.

He pursued classical studies and

at the School of Law, and then he declared his intention of becoming an artist. No obstacle whatever was placed in his way. He devoted himself to his profession without material cares and entered the Ecole des Beaux Arts in 1855. He was then a pale young man, his sensitive face framed by soft brown hair. His deep-set pensive eyes contrasted with his pouting, sensual lips and determined chin. He was even then defiant and caustic. Femininity scarcely existed for him, and while he formed friendships, they never became too intimate.

He made but a brief stay at the Ecole and then studied with Lamothe, the pupil of Hippolyte Flandrin, who in turn had been a pupil of Ingres. Then he went to Italy.

In Rome he formed friendships with painters at the Villa Medici. He met Georges Bizet and Gustave Moreau, whose friendship lasted until severed by death. In Tuscany he devoted himself to drawing, painting landscapes, and copying works by masters of the Fourteenth Century. He came under the influence of Poussin, and more and more under the spell of the great classicist, Ingres.

On his return to Paris he undertook simultaneously the production of historical pictures and the completion of a large portrait begun in Florence at the house of his uncle, the Senator Baron Bellelli, depicting him at his home with his wife and daughters. This work, which remained unknown until after the artist's death, is severe and frigid. It dissatisfied him and he never again undertook a group of similar dimensions. Fortunately, however, he did not renounce those isolated figures which have raised him to the rank of one of the finest psychological portraitists.

From 1860 to 1865 he devoted himself to historic and mythological subjects. This confused a generation which identified him with Impressionism, with dancing girls, and racing horses. He was seeking the association of lines and the solution of technical problems. He was admitted to the Salon, though quietly; the jury appreciated the science of his draughtsmanship and hoped that he would become a historical painter.

Suddenly he abandoned the path. Was he disturbed by the paradox between Ingres, whom he adored, and Delacroix, whom he admired? Was he trying unsuccessfully to conciliate classicism and romanticism? Or was he coming to the realization that he lacked imagination and was destined to express only what he saw? He wrote nothing and said little about himself at this time, so we can only conjecture.

He possessed his own conception of realism and truth, and never subscribed to the new dogma, "do nothing save in the presence of nature and the open air." What influenced him most in this period of uncertainty was Japanese art. Hokusai's magic line made him glimpse the possibility of uniting to the Primitives and the Classicists a new expression of contemporary subjects. He no longer exhibited his works except on rare occasions at the Durand-Ruel Galleries. He had no need to sell his pictures for a livelihood, and he held renown in derision.

In 1872 Degas made a journey to New Orleans to visit his uncle Musson, and his brothers Achille and René who were wealthy cotton merchants. He depicted them in their office with the clear precision of a Dutch master.



MADAME JULIE BURTIN
1863 Pencil drawing 14 1/4" x 10 1/4"
The Fogg Museum of Art, Harvard University,
Collection Paul J. Sachs

But his sojourn in America seems to have had no more influence on his work than his tours in Morocco and Spain, his Belgian and Dutch excursions, or his visits to Pausilippo, where his family had a villa. Paris alone captivated him.

"It is only a very long sojourn," he wrote, "which teaches one the habits of a race; that is to say, its charm. The instantaneous, that is photography, nothing else."

He was captivated in Louisiana by the white babies in the black arms of negresses, by the gardens and the steamboats, but he did not paint them.

"The women," he wrote to another friend, "are almost all pretty, and to the charms of many of them is added that ugliness without which they would not be perfect. But I fear that their heads are as weak as mine . . . on your honour, refrain from repeating what I have told you, that the women of New Orleans are weak-minded. Refrain from mentioning it to a soul knowing anyone in these parts. This is a serious matter. There is no trifling in New Orleans. My death would not wipe out such an affront."

Around 1865, when Degas was thirty-one, he made his choice of subjects — the racing and the dancing worlds. He visited the race-course to satisfy his passion for movement. He placed his scenes of the turf in true and pleasing landscapes, but above all, he strove to fix the mobility of the animals.

Then he directed his steps to the opera, first of all to the orchestra, for he loved music and had many friends among the instrumentalists. It was natural that when he relinquished historical and legendary figures to turn his attention to the life around him, he should seek his material in the world of opera and ballet, which he had so often witnessed from the darkness of the auditorium. Here he found movement and colour for his brush. By placing in the foreground, as a black value against a luminous ground, the scroll of a double bass, or the head and shoulders of a violinist, or by showing in perspective at the top of the canvas only the legs and part of the skirts of the dancers, he aroused indignation, but he achieved an extraordinary refinement of contrasts.

But soon this picturesqueness no longer satisfied him. A passion for truth possessed him; he wanted to get to the bottom of things. And then it was that he discovered the human values of back-stage life.

It was not the celebrated and fêted stars that held his attention, but the poor little girls of the *corps de ballet*, the unknown, the sorrowful, the anonymous. Girls whose salaries were pitiful for work exceedingly hard; ill-nourished young bodies, from which an excessive muscular effort was demanded. Girls who were elegant and graceful as long as the master beat time, but who reverted to weariness and vulgarity as soon as the fiddles had ceased.

Degas observed and listened. He made friends with these little girls, who were more eager to find, through their work, a "gentleman friend" than to secure better roles. He noted their gbscene or naïve remarks, as well as their wretched personal linen; their cast-off clothing or worn sandals; their heavily muscled limbs and flat or prematurely drooping breasts. In their company he satisfied both his appetite for truth and his mania for movement. His irony took on a keener edge, and his heart was filled with pity. He would have been horrified at the idea of producing literary paintings — "slices of life" — but he was a man, secretly good and infinitely sensitive.

Later Forain was in turn to study that little world and to depict, with mockery, procuresses, dressers, wealthy subscribers — effrontery and vice. Degas, though aware of these things, abstained from satire. It is difficult to find in his pictures a stage manager or author who is not there primarily for sombre pictorial value. Everything was geometric, plastic and eurythmic, and born of that rigid discipline was a series of masterpieces.

Sometimes they consist of compositions painted in the morning light of a bare rehearsal room, harmonies in bluish gray or beige, in which an unbound head of hair, or an adornment of artificial flowers assumes, amid cold tones, a delectable and powerful value. We experience a faint recollection of Vermeer and Watteau through the quiet intimacy and the supreme distinction of this art. And yet the painter does not hesitate to reveal the vulgar ugliness of a face, coarse laughter, or a girl contorting her body to scratch her back. In the canvases depicting actual performances, however, the miracle of transformation has taken place. The harmony of gold, pink, jade and turquoise carries away, amidst a whirlwind of

light and music, the recollection of defects, afflictions and banalities.

So eager was Degas to remain primarily a painter and draughtsman, that he not only refrained from too great a stress on satirical intention, but, with a few exceptions, he fought shy of descriptive titles, to the dismay of those who drew up his catalogues.

The Rape, sometimes given the more discreet title of *An Interior*, is one of the exceptions, when Degas, against his principles, was touched by drama. Whether the subject was an episode from a novel, or purely imaginative, we do not know, and it does not matter. While revealing a strange tenderness, Degas has raised it to the level of a masterpiece by the perfection of his technique. Amidst the poetic lights and shades of the virginal bed-chamber of a little working girl, a room softly lit by a lamp near an embroiderer's work-basket, we find ourselves in the heavy silence following a brutal struggle, a silence broken by the sobbing of the semi-nude victim. With his back to the door the man, once more correct, contemplates her despair. There is here a restrained



PORTRAIT OF JOSEPH TOURNY 1856 Etching
Cincinnati Art Museum



REST TIME

Private Collection

c. 1893 Pastel 20" x 26½"

pity and sadness which contradicts the general belief in the artist's insensibility. Other artists might have emphasized this scene by a lascivious disorder, but Degas' more subtle sense of drama counselled him to leave the little objects in their accustomed places. After a few abominable moments we see nothing amidst these now peaceful surroundings save a guilty man and a wretched girl.

When devoting himself to the study of nudes he endeavored, even more than in the case of the dancing girls, to seek no other object than nudity itself. Yet his sensitive nature could not quite escape the moral pressure of his time, the pressure of naturalism which gruffly disrobed the woman whom romanticism had gently clothed. From the ballet girls, with their familiar defects, he could not pass to insipid models disguised as figures in classic mythology. He sought his subjects away from the studio platform, in their own dressing rooms. He knew that a woman shows herself in the state of nudity only to the man she loves, or to her mirror. Nudism in the open air was unknown, and we are still far from accepting it. But in her bathroom a woman's nakedness has a believable *raison d'être*.

Neither love nor its illusions imposed upon his visual honesty, which took account of marks left by corsets and lacings, the vulgarity of flesh, the ravages of time. Above all, he sought the various combinations of the plastic figure,

the unexpected nature of movements where, screened from all eyes, a woman furbishes her body as if it were a weapon.

In this passion for honesty he was led to be more and more daring, almost to the point of oddity in his last big pastels with their jig-saw attitudes. These final works mark a return to an almost geometric conception of form. Solving new problems of draughtsmanship, perspective and colour, he revelled in associating flesh tones, in a subdued lighting, with objects — dressing gowns, porcelain, glassware — creating a wealth of high-lights. Here he succeeded in achieving a complete coalescence of modelling, value and line, so that his figures have the density of bronze, and at the same time are penetrated and haloed by diffused light. This series of nudes, thanks to a triple mastery of mind, eye and hand, possesses a unique value.

Degas did not hesitate to enter houses of prostitution to continue his observations, but in that sphere he produced only a few satirical monotypes. In an environment where Toulouse-Lautrec was to disport himself with bravado, Degas was too enamoured of art in the abstract, and too much the conservative bourgeois, to be drawn into participation in social concepts.

Once more the key to the man is found in his choice of subjects. Society, with its artifice and convention, had no

more appeal for him than commercial vices. The working man did not attract him, nor did he go to the fields to seek the peasant at his plough. But he found movement and colour and character nearer home, in his laundresses. The manner in which they apply weight to their irons, the tired one who stops to yawn in our faces, the angle at which they bend to balance their large baskets, all present the problems in drawing he was so avid to solve. The bluish-white of starched linen is a fine pretext for rare and subtle harmonies. Milliners, too, appealed to his fancy and gave him a logical excuse to present his figures behind a colourful foreground of hats.

Whether it was a question of a Greek myth, a race-course, a dancing girl or a nude, his method, his vision, and his synthesis were unvarying. Above all, he was a draughtsman, limiting himself as a painter to deep colour scales in portraiture, sober ones in landscape. Polychromy made but a weak appeal to him. He considered that too much sacrifice in the pursuit of fugitive effects of sunlight was an error, and that the atmosphere had no need to be "breathable."

In the field of engraving, Degas displayed a curiosity in the technique that led him to constant experimentation. His subjects were usually partial replicas of his sketches for painting, but in the ingenuity of the methods employed we recognize the patient research of an artist determined to extract from matter everything it has to give.

When he was about sixty he did a magnificent series of little evocations of nature in water-colour, oil and pastel, without a single figure. He wrote to Durand-Ruel:

"You are right, what beautiful country. We take excursions every day and these would end by turning me into a landscape painter, if my wretched eyes did not refuse to agree to such a transformation. I am sorry for you in your prison-like Paris, yet you will see with what serenity I am going to return there."

And to Pissarro:

"There is no need to compliment you on the artistic quality of your vegetable gardens. Only, as soon as you feel you are a little more used to things, try something bigger and more complete."

He had a few friends to whom he remained faithful all his life, dining with them rarely, and only upon agreement that they abandon all ceremony.

"I shall come," he said to Vollard, "at seven-thirty; no flowers on the table, please, and lock up your cat, and be sure no one brings a dog. If there are ladies, will they come without perfume? What horrors, all those odours when there are things which smell so good, like toast . . . and very few lights. My eyes, my poor eyes!"

And calling on friends who were out he left a note:

"Monsieur Degas, deeply moved, presents his New Year greetings to Monsieur and Madame Bartholom . He is

obliged to confess that he does not possess a visiting-card and that, when he finds people are not at home, he writes his name on the margin of the concierge's newspaper; or an envelope is handed to him."

His witty remarks gained for him the reputation of being bitter and caustic, but they were usually inspired by sham or pretentious mediocrity.

Moreau's predilection to overload his academic nudes with precious stones drew from Degas, despite his friendship, the words: "He adorns the Apollo Belvedere with a watch-chain." And when that same painter affected to live in a mystic retreat, Degas said, "He is a hermit, but well acquainted with the time-table."

Of Meissonier's battle scenes he said, "Everything is iron but the cuirasses," and when a slovenly painter was decorated with the L gion d'honneur and went from caf  to caf  showing his red ribbon, Degas exclaimed, "Well, that's one more stain on his person." A picture which he had sold for 500 francs fetched 400,000 at auction. When the reporters came to ask his impressions he said, "My impressions are those of a horse who, having won the Grand Prix, receives his usual bag of oats." And to a young painter who was boasting of his material success he said, "In my time, Monsieur, we did not get on."

We know nothing of Degas' relation to any particular woman. That there was one in his youth we are led to believe by some poems of a sentimental nature. It is possible that this frustrated love-affair aggravated his natural misanthropy. He remained on friendly relations with his family and his many acts of kindness to his friends were so furtive that Forain, Boldini, Mary Cassatt and Zuloaga have carefully refrained from bearing witness to them.

He worked as long as it was physically possible, until he was almost blind. Then he turned to the use of vivid colour, and to modeling. He wandered about the streets of his beloved Paris, the image of Homer. Toward the end money was not plentiful, but his wants were simple. The war of 1914 brought him to the verge of despair, and on September 26, 1917, he died, at the age of eighty-three.

We have not yet reached the time for a complete evaluation of Degas. All we know is that his singular and patient genius was sustained by the gifts of one of the most marvelous draughtsmen ever known, that he was dominated always by a search for truth, and that with all his audacity, he remained fundamentally a classicist.

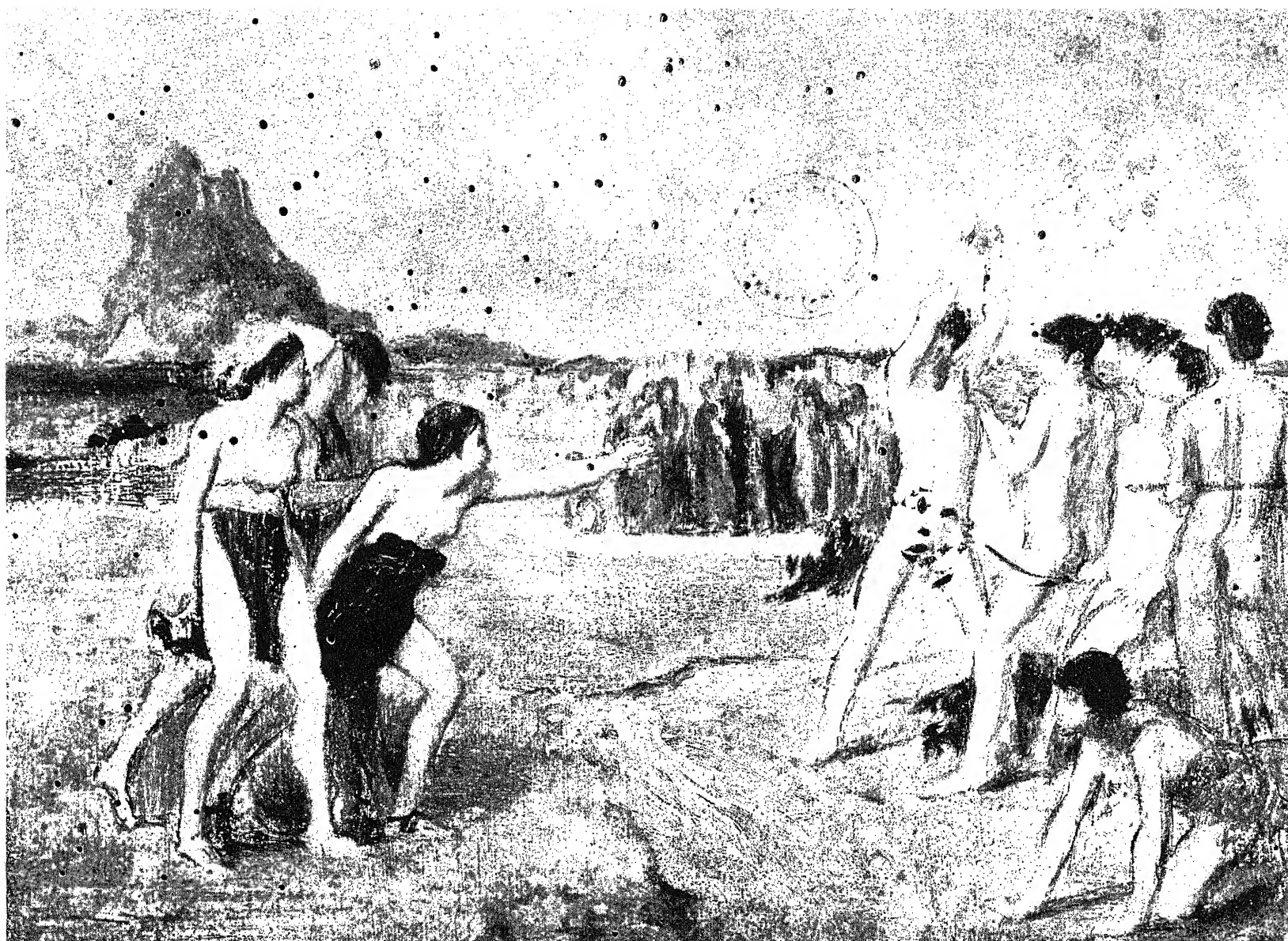
As to the man himself, one cannot love him. He did not ask to be loved. He was bitter, introspective, and lonely with that mighty solitude which only the great artist, struggling alone with his media, knows. No one devoted himself to the worship of art more fervently. His cult for it overshadowed ambition, honours, money or even human relationships. We cannot help but admire him.



MLLE. FIOCRE IN THE BALLET OF LA SOURCE

1866-68 Oil 51 $\frac{3}{16}$ " x 57 $\frac{1}{8}$ "

Courtesy of The Brooklyn Museum, New York



OIL SKETCH FOR YOUNG SPARTANS EXERCISING c. 1860 8¼" x 11"
The Fogg Museum of Art, Harvard University





THE MORNING BATH

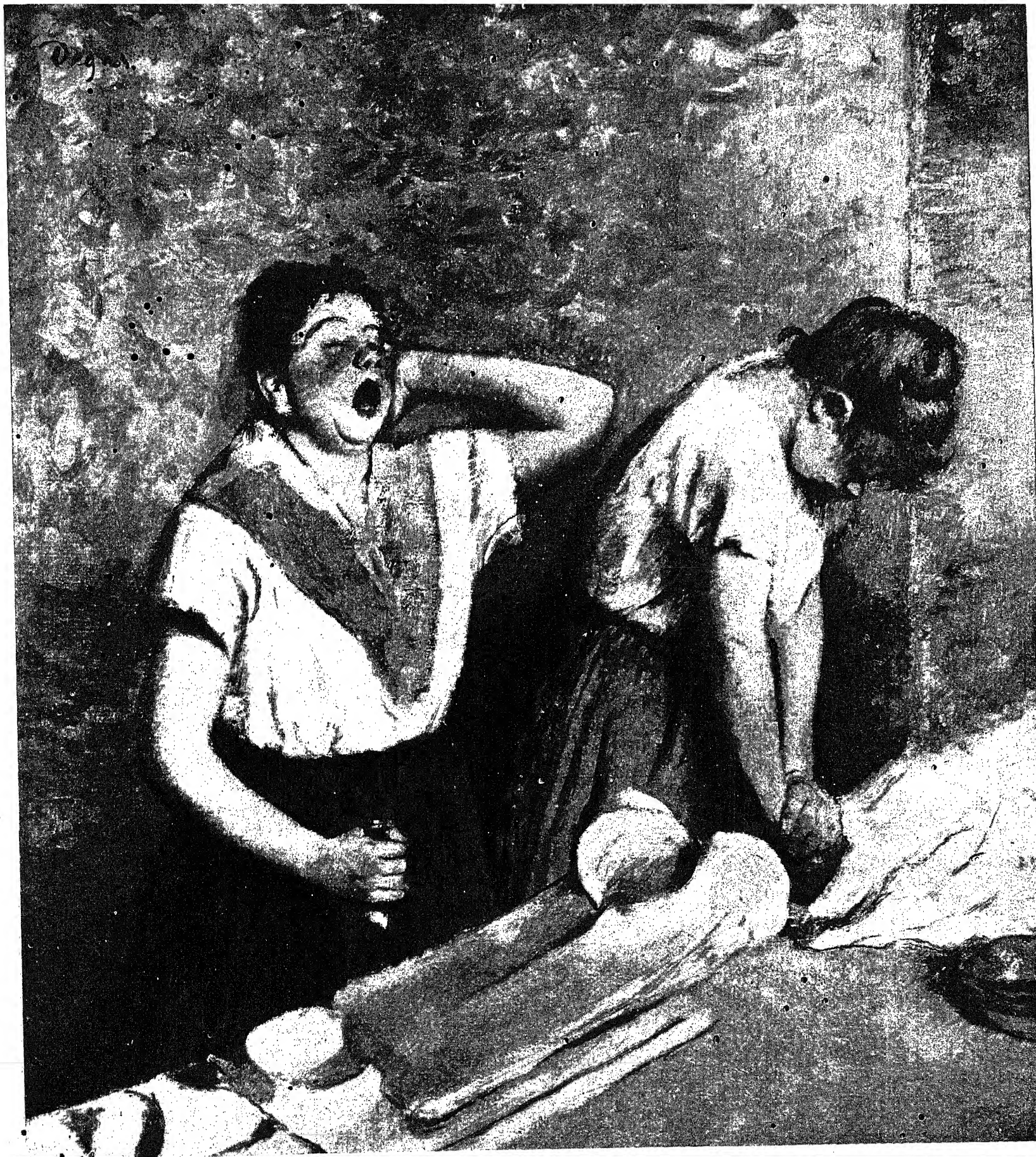
c. 1883 Pastel on paper 27 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 17"
The Art Institute of Chicago, Potter Palmer Collection



AFTER THE BATH

Ambroise Vollard, Paris

Oil 46½" x 38½"



TWO IRONERS

Courtesy of Durand-Ruel, Paris

1882 Oil 32" x 28"



[18]

THE DUKE AND DUCHESS OF MORBILLI

1855-56 Oil 45½" x 35"

National Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C., Chester Dale Collection (Loan)



TWO SISTERS

c. 1867-68 Oil 40" x 32"
Photo, Courtesy of Paul Rosenberg & Co., New York



AT THE RACES (GENTLEMEN RIDERS)

1877-1880 Oil 26½" x 32"

The Louvre Museum, Paris



HORSES

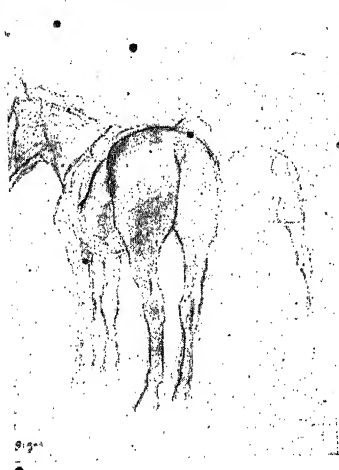
STUDY OF
DIEGO MARTELLI
Drawing

Fogg Museum of Art,
Harvard University,
Collection Paul J. Sachs



HEAD OF
EDOUARD MANET
Drawing

Collection Ernest Rouart,
Paris



THE MORNING RIDE

THE JOCKEY



JOCKEYS



Drawings
Courtesy of
The Art Institute
of Chicago



DEGAS' FATHER LISTENING TO PAGANIS c. 1872 Oil 31½" x 24⅞"
Collection John T. Spaulding, Boston



CAFE CONCERT

c. 1875-76 Pastel $14\frac{1}{2}'' \times 10\frac{1}{2}''$
Lyons Museum, France



THE BALLET

Pastel 12 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 10"

The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C.



BALLET SCENE

1878 Oil 10 $\frac{1}{4}$ " x 8 $\frac{1}{4}$ "
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Sam A. Lewisohn, New York



WOMAN WITH CHRYSANTHEMUMS •

1865 Oil 29" x 36½"

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



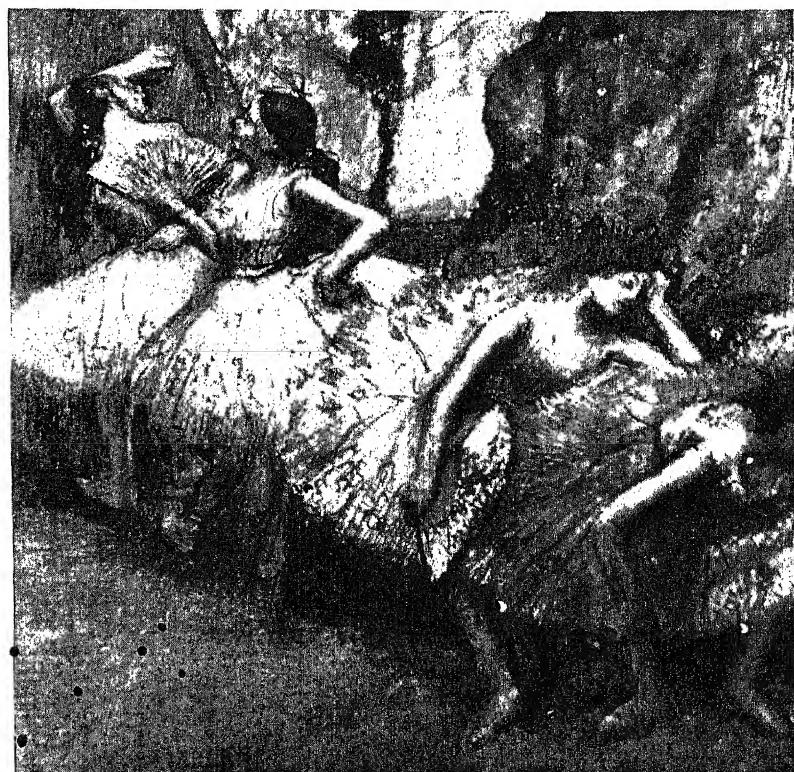
MARY CASSATT AT THE LOUVRE

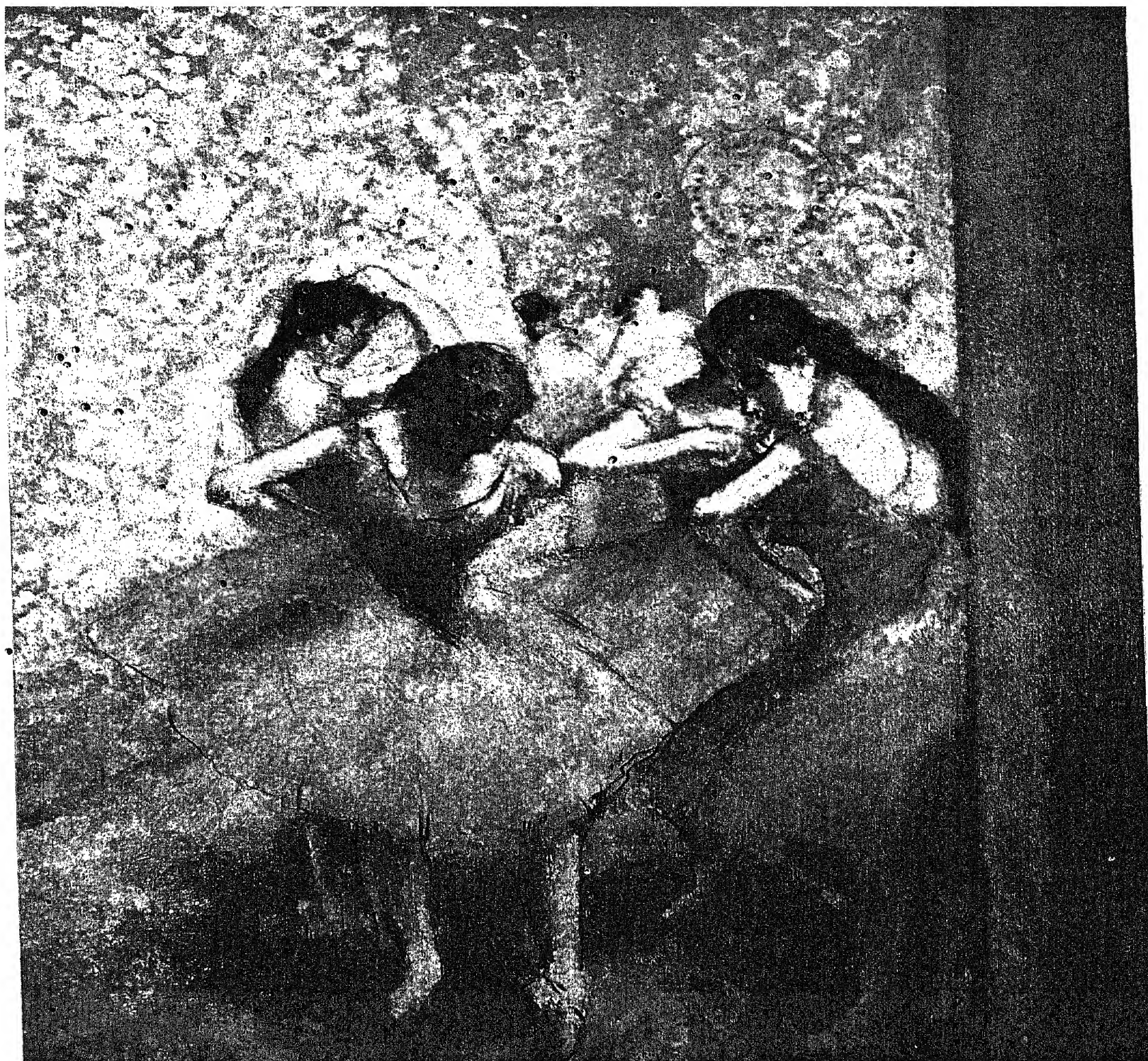
c. 1877 Pastel 27½" x 20½"

*Courtesy of French Art Galleries, New York**



Left to right: Drawings, courtesy of Carroll Carstairs, New York; City Art Museum of St. Louis; The Art Institute of Chicago; Phillips Memorial Gallery, Washington, D. C.; National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; Paul Rosenberg & Co., New York; City Art Museum of St. Louis.





DANCING GIRLS IN BLUE
Dr. Albert Charpentier, Paris

c. 1890 Oil 32" x 28"



PORTRAIT OF JAMES TISSOT

c. 1868 Oil 59 $\frac{5}{8}$ " x 44"

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



AFTER THE BATH

Private Collection, U.S.A.

1885 Pastel $26\frac{1}{8}'' \times 20\frac{7}{8}''$

[31]



THE MILLINERY SHOP

c. 1882 Oil 39" x 43 1/4"

The Art Institute of Chicago, Mr and Mrs L. L. Coburn Collection



DANCING GIRLS BEHIND THE FRAMEWORK OF A FLAT
Collection Mrs. Edward Jonas, New York

Pastel 28" x 20"



PORTRAIT OF Mlle SALLE

Pastel 20" x 20"

Collection Hoentschel, Paris. By courtesy of Alex. Reid & Lefevre Gallery, London.



HALF-LENGTH STUDY OF DANCING GIRLS
Toledo Museum of Art

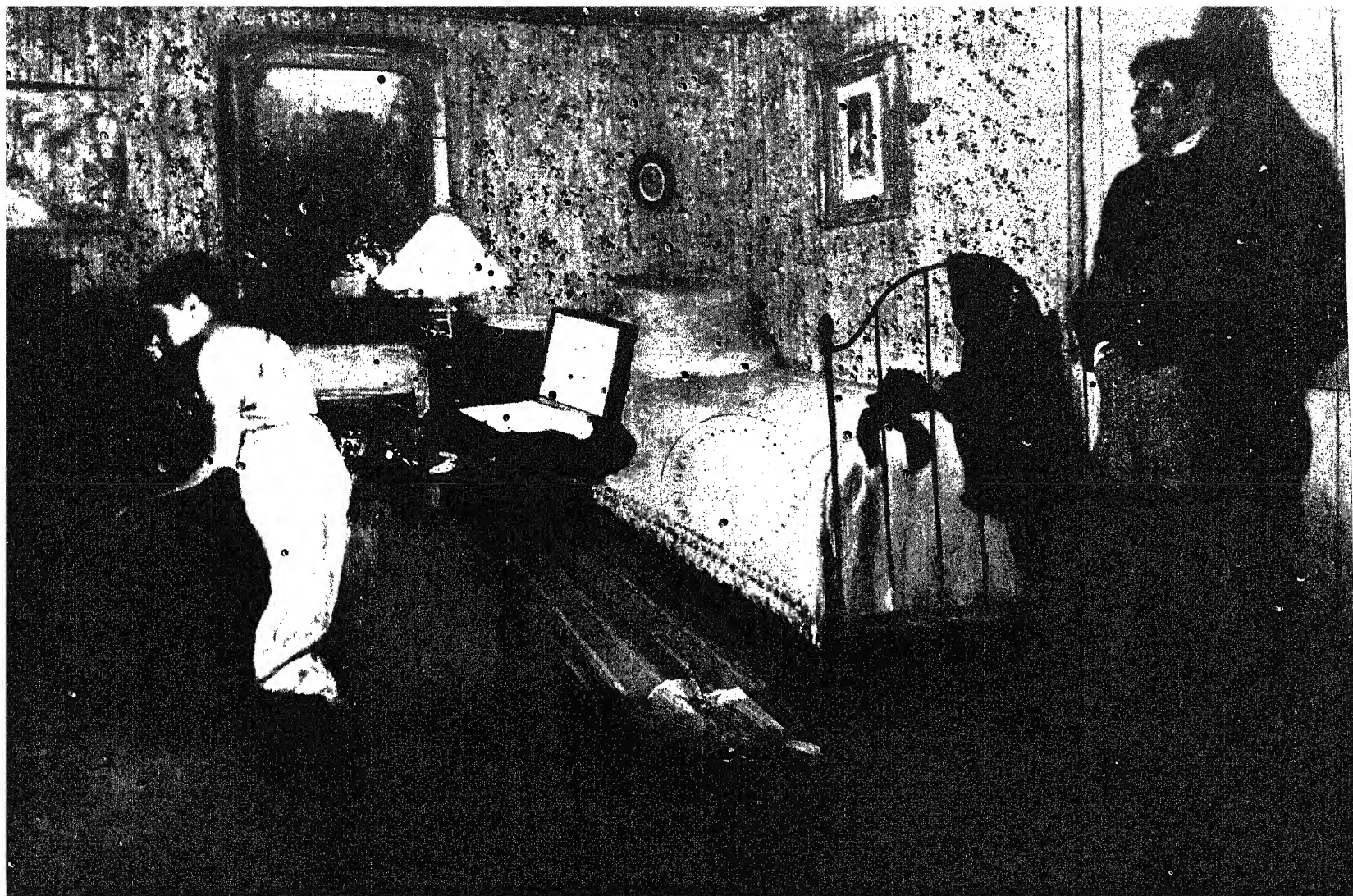
1899 Pastel 24" x 26½"



PORTRAIT OF A MAN

Oil 16½" x 12¾"

Private Collection, Photo Wildenstein & Co., New York



THE INTERIOR (THE RAPE)
Collection Henry P. McIlhenny, Philadelphia

1875 Oil 32" x 45"



RUSSIAN DANCING GIRLS

Ambroise Vollard, Paris

Pastel 26 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 20"



THE REHEARSAL 1878-79 Oil 18½" x 23¼"
Copyright The Frick Collection, New York

BALLET MASTER
Collection Henry P. McIlhenny, Philadelphia

Drawing





POUTING

1875-76 Oil 12¾" x 18¼"

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



FOUR DANCERS
c. 1899 Oil 59 1/4" x 71 1/4"
National Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C., Chester Dale Collection (Loan)



UNCLE AND NIECE

1862 Oil 38½" x 45½"

The Art Institute of Chicago, Mr. and Mrs. L. L. Coburn Collection



MLLE. HORTENSE VALPINCON

Oil 28" x 44"

Courtesy of Wildenstein & Co., New York



• PORTRAIT OF JULIE BELLELLI

14 1/8" x 9 3/4"

Drawing on cardboard

• The Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection,
Harvard University (Mr. and Mrs. Robert Woods Bliss Collection)



DANCING GIRL THANKING HER AUDIENCE
The Louvre Museum, Paris

1877 Pastel 30½" x 30¾"



AT THE RACES: "THEY'RE OFF"

c. 1870 Oil on wood 12" x 18½"

The Fogg Museum of Art, Harvard University



WOMAN AT HER TOILET

• 1882 Pastel 20" x 18½" •

Collection Herman Shulman, Stamford, Conn

PORTAIT OF DIEGO MARTELL
Jacques Seligmann, Paris

1879 Oil 30½" x 40½"

[47]

WOMAN COMBING HER HAIR

Courtesy of Durand-Ruel, New York

Pastel 28½" x 23⅝"

